



Meditators Guide For Dealing With Difficult People

Our relationships with people can often be challenging. We all have “difficult people” we need to deal with. It can be a source of pain, stress and frustration.

How can your meditation practice help you deal with them more skillfully?

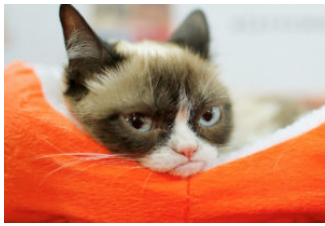
In this article I write about the main types of difficult people, and how the skills that come from meditation practice can help you deal with them more effectively.

[Disclaimer: Please, keep in mind that these are strategies to deal with general situations of social difficulty, and not extreme cases, like domestic violence.]

Six Types of Difficult People

Before we jump into specific strategies, let’s first explore the types of “difficult people” out there. This also serves as a self-knowledge exercise, because for sure each one of us might also wear one of these hats from time to time. Meditation and personal growth helps us be more aware of these patterns, so we can transform them.

The Complainer



There is always something wrong happening for them. Things are never good enough, and they have an urge to express their frustration with every little thing, every time. In its extreme version, the complainer becomes the *whiner* or the *victim*.

They want you to hear their complaints and agree with them.

Spending time with a complainer only makes you feel negative.

The key emotion here is dissatisfaction.

The Antagonist



They are aggressive, confrontational, and pushy.

Some of them have particular feelings of hostility towards certain groups of people, manifesting as racist or misogynistic behavior.

Sometimes it is a personal dislike. In many cases, however, it is not about you. They are just a boiling pot of anger and frustration, and will pour it often onto whomever happens to be next to them. They get irritated easily and like to blame or attack others. In extreme cases, they are bullies who intentionally want to hurt you – sometimes in covert ways.

A more refined version of the antagonist behaves in a more civil manner on the surface, but uses passive aggressive speech, jokes or sarcasm to vent their true feelings.

The antagonist can trigger in you feelings of anger, abuse, distress, or of being a victim of injustice.

The key emotions here are anger and aversion.

The Narcissist



It's all about them – and they want you to realize that. They love talking about their trips, fun times, achievements, and success, and clothes.

There is a feeling of self-entitlement. They want your attention, your confirmation, your fawning or admiration.

Talking to a narcissist often can make you feel disgusted and superficial. Or it can leave you with a false feeling that your life is not interesting.

The key emotion here is pride.

Mr. Better / Ms. Better



You find this type of person in every group. Their opinion is the only correct one, or at least the most accurate one. They believe they are better than you – be it in intelligence, material success, personal development, or whatever.

They conceal their flaws, have trouble apologizing or recognizing mistakes, and only put forward a shiny face.

What do they secretly want? Your recognition, admiration, and sometimes submission.

They are constantly judging and comparing. This can manifest as a “know it all” attitude; or as being a moralist, purist, elitist, or a show-off.

In a more refined expression, they hold their strong opinions with an armor of rational arguments, and use condescending language to point out your inadequacy.

Talking to a Mr. Better may make you feel bad about yourself, as if you are inferior.

The key pattern here is arrogance.

The Manipulator



They will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals, even if it means emotionally manipulating you to act according to their own self-interest.

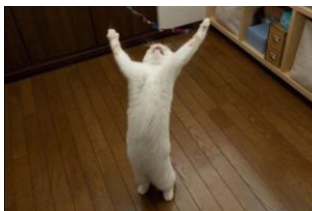
They may be quite skilled as individuals – self-driven, observant, charming, and possessing good emotional intelligence and communication skills.

In more severe cases, these are the psychopaths and sociopaths.

You may not realize when you are in the presence of the manipulator – although with meditation practice you will become better at detecting it.

The key emotion is selfishness.

The Drama Queen/King



They are in the habit of spinning small frustrations into outsized disasters, and create exaggerated emotional responses to trivial things. This can be accompanied by blaming others, hyperbolic speech, generalization, pessimism, paranoia, and vindictive behavior.

Their moods are volatile, and they expect you to engage in their self-indulgent monologues. When you don't, they make you feel bad for it.

They want our attention, emotional support, and ears. But spending time with them is exhausting, as if they are sucking your blood.

The key emotions here are neediness, self-importance, and panic.

Mindful Strategies for Dealing with Difficult People

How do meditators deal with difficult people? Equanimity, compassion, and mindful communication.

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

As I asked myself the strategies that I have used when dealing with difficult people, and researched what other meditators had to say about it, many interesting tactics came up. Then I started looking for common patterns between all these practices.

From my experience and study, these are the five principles that are most helpful in dealing with difficult people:

- **equanimity** — pause, breathe, and be present without getting emotionally affected
- **compassion** — understand them from the inside out
- **communication** — use active listening and skillful questions to get to the core issue
- **interruption** — don't get sucked into a rabbit hole; break negative interaction patterns
- **assertion** — if all else fails, confront them mindfully but sharply, bring things to a definite close, or avoid contact

Of course, this is all easier said than done. But with time and a solid meditation practice, you will become more proficient on skills/qualities. Let me now explore them one by one.

1. Equanimous Presence



Equanimity is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all these exercises. It is your “meditator’s armor”. It means that your limbic system is under control and that the prefrontal cortex is running the show – which is why you can respond to the present moment more thoughtfully.

Without equanimity you are naked, and the difficult person has managed to bring you to his/her own playground. *With* equanimity, you can be present and fully engaged, but detached. You can see things as they are, like a clear mirror.

When you find yourself interacting with a difficult person, the first step is to **pause and breath**. Don’t jump into any reaction. Ground yourself in your body. Find where it is tense. Relax that part.

For that purpose, give yourself a few seconds to drop into your body, calm your breathing, and evaluate the situation. Stopping for some moments may take a bit of courage, since the other person is likely used to an immediate reaction. Exercising that courage is essential.

This pause shows that you are in power, that you are grounded. This is what it silently communicates to the personalities above:

- To the Complainer, it says “That’s not important”
- To the Antagonist, it says “I’m not intimidated”
- To the Narcissist, it says “I’m not playing your games”
- To the Mr. Better, it says “I’m not impressed”
- To the Manipulator, it says “You cannot use me, I’m in control”
- To the Drama Queen, it says “I’m not buying it”

Equanimity means you don't need to become defensive. You are present, calm, fearless, and clear. A lion walking through the forest is never defensive, because he knows he has nothing to fear. That is the type of confidence that equanimity brings.

Equanimity is a direct product of meditation, and of purposeful daily practice. When you meditate, you are practicing equanimity every time you refrain from reacting to thoughts and emotions, and instead bring your attention back to your object of focus.

Equanimity is your meditator's armor. It will protect you from other people's emotional mess.

CLICK TO TWEET

Another way of developing equanimity in relation to a particular situation, is going into meditation, then bringing that person to mind, and remaining the calm observer of all that happens. You can do this in relation to recurring challenges that you face in your daily life. Once the challenge happens "for real", your nervous system will have already been trained to be equanimous in that situation.

Some people will try to take you out of your equanimity by saying you are cold, indifferent, or "not listening". Don't buy into that; it's a trap. Show from your actions that you are compassionate and engaged – just simply not emotionally distressed.

Developing equanimity without giving attention to developing the other four principles can help protect you from harm, but it can also create a sense of isolation from the other person involved, which is unhelpful, and even unkind. So let's now look at equanimity's sister, compassion.

2. Compassionate Understanding



Difficult people are difficult because they are driven by negative emotions. Whether they are aware of it or not, those negative emotions make them suffer. There is so much pain and confusion in them, that it's overflowing their [cup](#), and spilling all over you.

So remember, the person in front of you is likely wounded. Or they have severely myopic views of life, and little self-knowledge. They can't avoid it. They need help, not punishment.

Compassion is the core of all conflict resolution.

CLICK TO TWEET

When we put ourselves in their shoes, we are able to feel compassionate. We really *understand* them. Our anger/frustration with the situation diminishes, and we are able to be equanimous.

How can you put yourself in their shoes? Even for a minute try to imagine that you are inside their skin, that you have gone through what they have. Allow yourself to see the world as they see it. Try to really be inside their life circumstances, and feel as they feel.

You can do this exercise briefly in the moment, or at home as part of a [loving-kindness meditation](#) session. This is a powerful practice for building emotional intelligence and empathy. It will transform the way you see that person. You will be less annoyed by their behavior, and more able to hold your judgments more lightly.

3. Mindful Communication



Communication can make or break a relationship, marriage, company, or country – hence the need to be mindful and masterful in communicating. Bringing equanimity and compassion into your communication with others makes it much easier to communicate mindfully.

Mindful communication aims to be **calm**, **clear**, **direct**, and **compassionate**. It's not about winning an argument, but about having a constructive exchange. It also means avoiding destructive communication patterns such as sarcasm, irony, and a sharp tongue.

Here are a few examples and guidelines for mindful communication:

- Instead of attacking the Complainer or the Antagonist, ask ““What is your suggestion?” or “What is it that you are proposing?”
- When talking to a Drama Queen or a Mr. Better, raise questions that invite them to review their point of view and see for themselves what they may be overlooking.
- Diffuse anger or strong opinions by saying “Let me get back to you on that. You could be right.”
- Bring in perspective by asking “How else could we look at this problem?” or “Is there any chance that this way of seeing this is not the best?”
- Express your feelings directly, such as “I feel that ___” and “What you said makes me feel that ___”.
- Avoid using “absolute words” like *never*, *always*, *every time*, *everybody*, *no way*, *for sure*, etc.

In order to practice mindful communication, you need **active listening**, and **self-awareness**. Humor can also play a role of lightening things up, but that's off topic.

Active listening means giving undivided attention to what the person is saying, rather than thinking about what you will say next. And you show that you are listening, by means of eye contact, body language, nodding, and verbal feedback (such as saying "I see", "mmm hmm").

It is also helpful, when talking, to start by summarizing in one short sentence what the other person has said. "*So I understand that you are upset because ____ while you expected ____.*" This makes them feel heard and understood.

Self-awareness is needed so that you think before you speak, and closely monitor your words and the tone of voice, and their impact on your listener. It is an ongoing process, so keep tweaking these variables to ensure the smoothest communication.

Mindful communication is rooted in *equanimity*, *presence*, and *compassion*. It's not necessarily "being nice" – it can also be confronting, but in a skillful way. The meditative ideal is to always aim to interact in a loving way, so there is growth on both sides. Sometimes that is not possible, and we can't avoid that person either, so then we need to be assertive – or else we fall into what Pema Chodron calls *idiot compassion*. (See [this great book](#) of hers).

When mindful communication doesn't do it, we need to either break the other person's pattern or assert our boundaries. But always with equanimity and compassion as the foundation.

4. Interruption



Here the subject can get a bit touchy and controversial.

Some people seem to believe that meditation and mindfulness is all about being nice, meek, and passive. It's true that meditation gives you the ability to be more calm and compassionate. But it also gives you more awareness, inner strength, and willpower – and sometimes you need to be firm and assertive. Not out of hatred, but out of self-respect and self-protection.

Some philosophies and spiritual teachers are against this, and will ask you to just accept and turn the other cheek. Others will say that we should be harmless, but we can use strength to defend ourselves when the aggression is initiated by the other part. So depending on your inclination, you might not want to use the strategies in this section – that is up to you.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” – Edmund Burke

We all have patterns of behavior, communication, and thinking. The difficult person in front of you is stuck in *their* patterns; and sometimes they are so attached to them that they just cannot see beyond their biases. You have tried to be compassionate and to communicate mindfully, but it still didn't work, and the situation is escalating.

If that is the case, one of two things will happen: either the other person will suck you into their black hole; or you will interrupt their pattern. There is rarely any merit into being dragged into their mess and feed the negativity. On the other hand, breaking their pattern by using aggressive means – like being louder, angrier, or ruder – is often disastrous. Retaliation rarely does any good.

As meditators, we can use our presence of mind, boldness, and willpower to shift the conversation powerfully, but without resorting to aggression. I'll explore three ways to do this, from the most passive to the most assertive. They all require a certain degree of courage.

The Gandhi Way (passive)

If you just remain as you are, with equanimity, and showing absolutely no emotional response to the other person's mind games, they'll eventually get it. You can't talk to a Buddha statue for too long without realizing that it won't answer back. Here's a cat doing exactly that:

Thus, you are interrupting them without doing anything in particular. You can take this up a notch by also peacefully staring into their eyes as they speak, and keeping still ([trataka meditation](#) helps).

Your silence, your non-involvement, is basically like giving rope for a person to hang himself (metaphorically, please). If this were a game, the most emotionally involved player is the loser. It's an expression of the *unfuckwithability* that I spoke about in [this post](#).

Several years ago I have personally used this method many times with abusive people, and it worked like a charm. The person's aggression is reflected directly back onto them; they become frustrated, and finally quit. And you basically spent no energy achieving that!

The Socratic Way (questioning)

Socrates was known as a great debater, and his technique was very interesting: instead of making assertions, he would ask many questions, slowly getting people to agree to all his premises. So, what is the

So, what is the Socratic way of dealing with a difficult person?

It is to reclaim the power in the interaction by asking them pointed questions that push them to see things from a different perspective, and to question their behavior. As the talk progresses, get really specific with your questions, to arrive at the core issue – it's often different from what it appears on the surface.

So spend your energy asking more questions, rather than fighting back on the grounds of what they are saying. And do so with a calm voice and a curious attitude.

What I've noticed when using this technique is that people try to evade your question, and just bring back their own negativity. Or they make faces and say the question doesn't make sense. In any case, if you politely stick to it, they will eventually retreat and look for someone else to dump their mess onto.

The Rebel Way (confronting)

When nothing else works, the *Rebel Way* confronts the person more directly. By calling out their behavior, the rebel puts a mirror in front of the other person's face.

This can be useful when people persist in passive aggressive or condescending behavior. They feel like they are hiding behind the bush while throwing stones at you – so when you bring it to the light, their silliness is exposed. Now the ball is in their court and they are all busy trying to defend their position.

Here are some examples of confronting in the Rebel Way:

- “From your condescending comment, I can see that you believe that ____”.
- “Are you suggesting that your way is the only right one?”
- “From hearing your complaints I have the impression you have given a lot of thought about this. What solution do you recommend?”
- “Look, I know I'm not your favorite person. You are often hostile to me. But we need to work together. So, what are your thoughts?”
- [To the manipulator] “I know what you are trying to do here. [Silence and walk away]”
- “It seems we are having another Drama Queen day today, are we?”

Of course, we can tone it up or down, depending on the circumstance, the person involved, and what is at stake.

What's the result of this strategy? They'll be more mindful when talking to you.



5. Assertion Of Boundaries



To control aggression without inflicting injury is the Art of Peace. — Morihei Ueshiba

If mindful communication, powered by compassion doesn't work...

If trying to directly shift the conversation or interrupt the other person's patterns doesn't work...

Then all you have left is to assert your boundaries. Unless you want to let them walk all over you...

To draw the line, take charge of the situation and bring the interaction to a close. This is an act of self-compassion, and also of compassion for the other person – because allowing him/her to go on and on in that pattern is not going to bring him/her any growth.

Here are some ways of closing (from softer to firmer):

- *"Look, I feel our conversation is not progressing much at this point. Let's just sleep on this issue and talk again another time."*
- *"I have to stop you right there. It seems like you are having a tough day. I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this right now."*
- *"I don't want to be engaged in this type of conversation anymore. So I'm logging out. Bye!"*

As you are bringing the interaction to a close, remember that you are *taking charge*. It's just like when you take charge of your attention during meditation practice when it has wandered off into distractions.

So be sure to express your decision with powerful body-language (straight, open, and forward) and a firm voice. Instead of throwing the ball back at them, you are throwing it *out of the court*, and walking away. For you, the game is over.

Henceforth, you just try to avoid contact with that person, if possible. That is also asserting boundaries.

Bringing It All Together

We all need to interact with “difficult people” in our life. Or, better said, we need to interact with people that often give us *difficult times*.

These are precious opportunities for us to grow as a person, and test the powers of our meditation. By bringing out the shadow in us, difficult people make us aware of what we need to work on. By touching our wounds, they bring them to the surface so we can examine the, and do the necessary work of self-transformation.

The key practice is developing **equanimity** and **compassion**. These two qualities are helpful in all types of human interaction. When they are present, to some extent, then **mindful communication** is possible, and can work wonders. If all else fails, you need to **interrupt** the difficult person, or **assert** your boundaries and close things up – but always with compassion and equanimity.

There are entire books written on each of these elements – equanimity, compassion, communication, assertion. Here is simply my synthesis, so you can quickly put them into action in your life, today.

In this post I mostly shared what worked in my own journey, and I’m open to your criticism, corrections, and suggestions. Please share your thoughts in the **comments**.

Follow at:

Facebook --- <https://www.facebook.com/liveanddare>

Twitter --- https://twitter.com/gio_self

Quora --- <https://www.quora.com/Giovanni-Dienstmann>

Periscope --- <https://www.periscope.tv/giovanni/>

Pinterest --- <https://www.pinterest.com/gioself/>

Google+ --- <https://plus.google.com/+Liveanddare/posts>

Linkedin --- <https://www.linkedin.com/in/giovanndienstmann/>